

Libraries Without Walls 4: The Delivery of Library Services to Distant Users. Proceedings of an International Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University, 14-18 September 2001. Edited by Peter Brophy, Shelagh Fisher, and Zoë Clarke. London: Facet Publishing, 2002. 299 pp. ISBN: 1-85604-436-X.

In her keynote paper, “Behind-the-screen thinking: Key factors for librarianship in distance education,” Elizabeth J. Burge opens with a line by Groucho Marx: “I must say that I find television very educational. The minute somebody turns it on, I go to the library and read a book.” (7) While library users continue to follow in Groucho’s footsteps, many are now ‘going’ to the library with the click of a mouse – connecting online instead of visiting the library through its front doors. What consequences are there for the provision of library services to these remote library users? The papers in this collection address this theme by exploring various modes of information delivery, approaches to information literacy at a distance, technological challenges, and other topics – and all place library users at the forefront of the discussion.

Librarians, library managers, university educators, administrators, and students will all find papers of interest here, regardless of the depth of their involvement with distance education. Originally presented at the fourth *Libraries without Walls* conference in Molivos (on the Greek Island of Lesbos) in 2001, the papers place the library at the heart of distance (and lifelong) learning opportunities. By using library services as the focus for discussion and debate, the conference addresses issues that resonate across the broader context of distance education. As the conference organizer (the Centre for Research in Library and Information Management) notes:

Lifelong learning is becoming a reality throughout the world, requiring that learning opportunities be delivered to all citizens in their locality, at work or at home, and resulting in the restructuring of higher education. Librarians will be called upon to find innovative and imaginative ways to support such learning, and to treat ‘distant’ learners on an equal footing with those on-campus. The ‘Libraries without Walls’ conferences address this important theme.¹

In the introduction to the collection, the editors note that the conference topics have evolved quite dramatically since the first conference, held in 1995. While that first conference offered a forum for the examination of a niche topic area (i.e., library outreach to the small number of remote users), the fourth conference embraces a new social norm – remote, global access by citizens from all walks of life, to an ever-increasing range of information resources – and how best to serve these individuals. Burge’s keynote sets the stage by detailing eight factors relevant to libraries serving distant users – from advances in online information literacy services, to disintermediation, or the removal of the ‘middle person’ in users’ quests for information. She then proposes four “thinking tasks” designed to shake current service approaches, and guide librarians and educators in making the best investments of conceptual and logistical energies in supporting distance education.

The conference papers themselves provide much fodder for critical – and creative – thinking on the design and application of remote support services. The papers are grouped into six themes. ‘Libraries and Virtual Learning Environments’ includes a discussion of a virtual campus project at the University of London (Sally Chambers & Paul McLaughlin), while ‘Online Enquiry Services for Remote Users’ includes two papers that examine real-time connections with users: a chat system at the University of Leicester (Lou McGill); and, the “Online Personal Academic Librarian” system used at the Open University (Gill Needham & Evelyn Simpson). ‘Virtual Libraries and National Initiatives’ presents perspectives from Denmark, Greece, and the UK on such topics as library consortia (Claudine Xenidou-Dervou, Sassa Tzedaki, Anna Fragkou & Marina Korfiati) and electronic resources (Bo Öhrström).

The section on ‘User Behaviour and User Training in the Distributed Environment’, provides an equally diverse selection of papers, from Jenny Craven and Jillian Griffiths’ discussion of sighted and visually impaired users’ information-seeking behaviours in an electronic environment, to Virpi Palmgren and Kirsi Heino’s discussion of the value of integrating information searching skills into the university curriculum. While ‘The Public Library’s Role in Serving Distant Users’ includes only two papers, this theme is important, as it moves the discussion of remote users beyond the (typical) frame of the academic environment into the realm of the everyday citizen looking for information. Here, Clare Nankivell and Juliet Eve discuss the importance of public library staff training in information and communications technology, while Rob Davies describes the PULMAN Network of Excellence – a European-Commission initiative designed to support a user-friendly information society.

‘Content Development for the Virtual Environment’ includes a paper on electronic scientific information (Jan Kooistra and Kees Hopstaken) and one on copyright – a topic, as authors Judy Watkins and Tracy Bentley note, that “can strike terror into the hearts of many librarians” (251). The final theme in the collection, ‘Key Technology Issues in Delivering Services to Distant Users,’ examines elements that are central to all of the papers in the collection – the technology that sits between the library and its users. Ross MacIntyre and Ann Apps discuss a Z39.50-compliant version of the British Library’s Electronic Table of Contents, while Antony Corfield, Matthew Dovey, Richard Mawby, and Colin Tatham present a “visual toolkit” for information retrieval in their discussion of the Java Access for Electronic Resources (JAFER) project.

The content of the papers is engaging, the editorial work is clean, and the bibliographic entries will prove valuable to both students and researchers. The index itself is well-crafted; however, the exclusion of abstracts for the papers is a troublesome oversight that hinders the reader’s ability to browse each work in terms of tone and topical depth of treatment. While some of the papers’ introductory notes may act in lieu of formal abstracts, the length of the collection, and the range of topics and perspectives discussed, demand attention to this detail. As the conference website includes some brief abstracts for the original conference papers, including these in the published proceedings would substantially enhance the read-ability of the text.

While many readers will enjoy the range of topics and the seamless editing that frames the collection, the lack of methodological and theoretical approaches used to examine the topics leaves this reviewer wanting more from the text. Although the editors must be commended for gathering such an impressive list of contributors – including scholars and information professionals from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States – the majority of the papers are descriptive in nature, and do not represent the methodological balance that one might expect from an international conference. While descriptive papers offer a valuable glimpse of best practice, formal (qualitative and quantitative) research studies are needed to fully explore the impact of digital information use on users – and on the changing nature of librarians' work. There is no question that the technology and users' demand for remote access have advanced quite rapidly since the first *Libraries without Walls* conference. Yet the conference itself – as represented by the papers gathered in this volume – has not been similarly transformed. As scholars, educators and information professionals look ahead to the fifth conference, they must reflect on recent practice by employing a range of theoretical frameworks and research methods. In doing so, they will surely set the stage for crafting the best possible library services to support all individuals engaged in distance education.

1. Centre for Research in Library and Information Management. 2002. *Libraries without walls 4: The delivery of library services to distant users: Distributed resources – distributed learning* [conference website, accessed November 18, 2002]. Available at: <http://www.cerlim.ac.uk/conf/lww4confer.html>

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